

ACCREDITATION OF MISSOURI'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

During the past few years, Missouri's child welfare system has undergone audits and reviews leading to the recognition of the need for change and improvement. The Missouri Department of Social Services, Children's Division responded by devising plans to enhance its practices to better ensure the safety and well being of children.

In 1999, the Division began the process of becoming accredited by the Council on Accreditation (COA), an independent accrediting body that provides an objective marker for consumers and other stakeholders that a human services organization meets national standards of organizational strength and quality of service. COA provided an analysis of the specific strengths and weaknesses in areas of the Division's governance, operations, and services.

During FY 2001, the Division was unable to continue with its accreditation efforts due to the state's fiscal constraints. However, the Division used COA's feedback to put corrective plans into action. During the FY05 legislative session, the Department was granted a \$9.3 million appropriation as the first installment of a five-year plan, allowing the Division to resume its mission to become accredited.

All of Missouri's 45 judicial circuits completed circuit self-assessments to evaluate: demographics, circuit structures, staffing needs, facilities, quality improvement processes, Peer record reviews, personnel practices, relationships with juvenile courts and community partners, service arrays, case work practices and outcomes. This information was used to determine which circuits are most ready to receive COA site visits in the first wave.

Six judicial circuits comprised of Circuit 32 (Cape Girardeau, Bollinger, and Perry Counties), Circuit 33 (Scott and Mississippi Counties), Circuit 34 (New Madrid and Pemiscot Counties), Circuit 35 (Dunklin and Stoddard Counties), and Circuit 11 (St. Charles County) were selected to go through the first wave of the accreditation process. Jackson County had also been identified in the first wave but, there may be constraints in staffing them up to 100% in the next fiscal year. In addition to these five sites, Central Office and the Hotline will receive site visits during the first wave to become accredited. Each year thereafter in this five-year plan, a new wave of circuits will be brought in until Missouri's system, as a whole, achieves accreditation.

The first opportunity to demonstrate compliance will be through the agency Self Study. Areas such as continuous quality improvement, organizational integrity, quality of the service environment, management of human resources, financial management, training and supervision, and service delivery will be examined in depth by COA.

The second opportunity to show compliance with COA standards will be during the COA site visits. COA peer reviewers will further evaluate the Division's programs, policies, procedures, and practices through various on-site activities such as facility observations, staff interviews, and case record reviews. The first COA site visits will likely occur at the end of June or summer of 2005 to Central Office, the Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline, and Circuits 32 and 33. Subsequent visits to the remaining first wave sites, (Circuits 34, 35, and 11) will occur in successive two-three month intervals following the initial visits.

Improved consumer and stakeholder confidence will be certainties because responsiveness and accountability are requirements for maintaining accreditation. To achieve and maintain accreditation, workers will have lower caseloads thus be better prepared to focus their efforts on helping children and families. Leaders will be better educated thus qualified to offer invaluable guidance to frontline workers, and staff ratios will be reduced meaning workers will have more access to their supervisors. Staff will be better trained to face daily professional challenges.

Maintaining accreditation means the Division will engage in practices promoting continuous quality improvement, the very hallmark of accreditation. Continued financial support from the legislature will be crucial in accomplishing this important endeavor.